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OUR NATIONAL CONCEITS.

BY MURAT HALSTEAD.

CONCERNING certain conceits of our countrymen, it should be stated, before subjecting them to critical consideration, that they are to the average American citizen a precious possession. A conceit is not necessarily fanciful or false, but is rather a pleasing presumption, possibly a generous illusion, the estimation of a quality or faculty a shade beyond its actual worth, an appreciation of one's own merits that quickens into an exaggerated self-esteem, a vanity in the valuation of the things one holds, the perception of a peculiarity in that which is one's own that carries it beyond the sharp line of testimony and bestows upon it an individual flavor.

There are conceits national and conceits personal. The American citizen has something of both, and the national conceit sometimes magnifies the history of our own country at the expense of that of the other nations of the earth, and has even gone to the extent of glorifying a wrong, and vindicating, so far as it may be accomplished with arrogant assumption, errors obvious to mankind.

It is within the recollection of millions when it was one of our conceits to associate the worst form of slavery in the world with the most gaudy ideas of universal liberty. The nation, for this presumptuous sin, passed through a process of purification and education, and one of the first advantages gained through the awful sacrifice of war was the ability to see ourselves as others were seeing us. When the folly and the wrong were known, betterments became possible.

It was an American conceit that we might actually ignore the lessons that through the ages had been accumulated in the experience of men, that we might violate the great historical laws that prescribed the necessity of justice, and go on by some inherent quality, surpassing anything that had been achieved, with-

out paying the penalties of the ignorance of truth or the wantonness of error.

There was a time when American vanity prevented the great mass of the people from comprehending that we were upon the verge of civil war, and as certain to drift into it as one in the rapids above the falls of Niagara to go over the precipice; and the strangest folly was the opinion, obstinately held on either side of the line that divided the mustering armies, that those opposed would not fight. One of the guarantees of peace in the future is that we know better than that all around.

It is one of the teachings of the war that there is no peculiar exemption for the American people from the calamities that have befallen other peoples, and we have passed from the vain incredulity on the subject of war, the irritable assertion of its impossibility in the face of the currents that rendered it inevitable, to take a pride in the extraordinary extent and destructiveness of the warfare in which we were five years engaged, and the warlike capacities of the men of all the States abundantly shown.

American conceits, often aired at home, are always conspicuous abroad, and the leading purpose, if not the ruling passion, of the American in another country, especially if he has not made himself as conspicuous as he would like at home, is to inflict astonishment upon the strangers within whose gates he may be. A friend just starting for a tramp in the British islands declared that he would show the British in a few days that he "could stamp on their soil with a pair of American-made, square-toed boots." Another rejoiced, in the railroad stations of France, to rush across the tracks; and the pains the French railway officials took to prevent him from destroying himself amused him excessively. Still another occupied himself chiefly, in a tour of several weeks, shouting for ice-water and American breakfasts, and showering maledictions upon the servants who could not understand, much less accommodate, him; and he thought the louder he scolded and swore the better he was speaking the language of the land.

Once I heard an American in a smoking-room in an English hotel engaged in conversation with a British officer on the subject of the war in this country. The American was a young Kentuckian, who, desiring to impress his interlocutor with the amenities of our civilization and the refinements of home influences, had just told an anecdote of a neighbor and companion

who galloped into the county town while court was in session, his belt stuck full of revolvers and a double-barrelled shot-gun across the pommel of his saddle, and spurred his horse up and down the street, defying everything and ready to murder any and every body in a moment, and sure to get the drop on one who criticised his performance. The response of the officer to the touching narrative was that the story was "something extraordinary." He listened intently, and ventured, when the hero of the tale rode off in triumph, brandishing his shot-gun and daring the world in arms to fight, to change the subject by observing: "I suppose that the battles of the Franco-German war were far more bloody than any of those in the war in your country."

The expression of the young Kentuckian was that of indignant amazement. "No, sir," said he in thrilling tones; "the battles that were fought in my country were the bloodiest that were ever fought anywhere on earth. Now, take the battle of Shiloh; it raged without a moment's intermission for seven days and nights. When it began it was in the midst of a dense wilderness on the Tennessee, and when it was ended there was not a tree standing within nine miles of the river, and twenty thousand men were killed on each side and were dead in the fallen timber."

The British officer remarked: "It is astonishing. I think you possibly mean that there were twenty thousand men on each side killed, wounded, and missing; say forty thousand on both sides *hors du combat*. That would be sufficient, I should say, for a great battle," and he called for another brandy and soda.

"No, sir," said the citizen from old Kentucky; "there were twenty thousand dead on each side, and they were buried where they fell. There was nothing like that in the French and Dutch fighting"; and, of course, there was not. The incident may illustrate one of the phases of the conceits of the American citizen. It is not worth while for anything to happen in any other country comparable with that which occurs in the United States.

An amusing form of the pride of our countrymen is the endless self-assertion of the American traveller as to the superiority of our sleeping accommodations on the cars in the United States, and the wonderful advantages derived from the use of brass checks in relieving ourselves of the care of luggage during long journeys. The miracle of the identical trunks with the identical brass checks turning up at the right moment, without

the requirement of personal supervision, is so incessantly mentioned and regarded as a virtue, and pointed out with pride, that it is almost in the nature of a mania.

Reflection should teach the traveller, at least the travelling patriot, that such superiority as we have in methods of spending nights on the cars, and relieving ourselves of the care of trunks, grows out of the fact that we make more long journeys than any other people. Whatever merit there is in this we should entirely appreciate, though the impressiveness of perpetual boastfulness on the subject may be questioned. It is quite as indisputable as the superiority in the length of our rivers, the extent of our fresh-water lakes, and the amount of our sea-coasts, if we neglect to compare them with the shores of British North America, and Russian Asia, and Australia, that we fly about the globe with longer-range facilities than any other portion of its population.

But the persistent belief of the American abroad in the incomparable advantages of his system of roaming up and down the earth at home is something so continually met, and so pathetic in some of its aspects, that it will hardly do in treating the subject to touch it with humor. The emotions are enlisted.

It does not seem to be absolutely established that the English, French, and Germans, and other Europeans also, are semi-barbarous because they habitually build the lines of their roads heavier than we do and run trains that are lighter. They have, too, pretty good accommodations for sleeping on their through trains, though they do not, as a rule, in their sleeping-cars, tuck away great quantities of bed-clothing without ventilation in boxes overhead, where in the summer time they get the benefit of the sun from the superheated roofs; and if we make specialties of certain conveniences on our trains, we should remember the perfection of accommodations at the stations abroad.

European cars are quite well ventilated when the people themselves permit the air to circulate in them, but the average native of Europe has a conceit of the terrors of a current of air that is a weakness of the imagination happily absent in the American. It is an alarming thing in a crowded and heated car in Europe, even if there are dogs present, or gentlemen redolent of malt liquor and tobacco, to open a window. A general shudder ensues, and a gesture, if not a word, of apology is in order.

The portentous betterment of a baggage-check when it is brass rather than paper is an American specialty that will hardly bear the analysis of hostile criticism. The miracle of the brass is that it travels around and about and gets back in the same place, and keeps forever in circulation, as if it were possibly a representative of the solar system or a legal-tender coin. In Europe a check serves just once. It is a slip of paper, but if you hold it fast it is good for your luggage, no matter how far you go. If you have half a dozen pieces, they are weighed, their weight is carefully put down, and each piece of the series numbered with the same figures. The figures are on your flimsy paper scrap, and if it is ever so small and slight and blotted, it calls for all you have at the end of your journey.

Arrived in Paris from any point of the compass, no matter how much property you have in boxes and packages, if they have been intrusted to the road service, they will all turn up together at the right place, if you know enough to find it, for they are numbered as of the same lot, and your bit of paper with the corresponding figures calls for it all. Or in London you know you are to sail on a steamer from Liverpool for New York, and the number of your room; be on time at the baggage-office, and have your bags and boxes and bundles duly marked with the name of the steamer and number of room, and "for the hold" if you do not wish to see the article before crossing the ocean; and you may move confidently through the chaos of frantic people and the giddy maze of sea-trunks in circulation. Many will not, but all might. The chances are very great that nothing will be lost or mislaid. Do not indulge the conceit of fretting, but be calm, and you will find your belongings in the state-room, and at home the long-lost trunks will rush down the slide from the steamer into the hands of our accomplished custom-house officers.

The American, though, is wronged, as a rule, in his own mind, when his baggage is weighed; and to be charged a pretty lively figure for each pound that is above one-half the weight of the average human being is a source of grief for which there is no consolation, as it is unreasonable. There is not any notion more obstinate in the American traveller than that he is entitled to take half a dozen Saratoga cottages without stoves with him, and to find them thundering after him whenever he gets into his hotel; but if he has to pay charges in Europe for a few weeks

upon his ponderous *impedimenta*, he begins to grow weary and to take a more philosophical view of personal rights, for he doesn't need to carry a row of houses with or without cooking-stoves.

The most provoking of the American fancies about a foreigner to a foreigner—and everybody who has not been born in the United States is to the American citizen a foreigner, just as all the people in the days of the Roman Empire's glory, except the people of Rome themselves, were barbarians—is that he is called upon to sympathize, from the ineffable altitude of a favored being, with the down-trodden life of effete despotisms.

Mr. Lowell has remarked on the "Certain Condescension" of some eminent strangers with respect to Americans, and if the foreigner should reply, he would probably, if apt in phraseology, dwell upon that Certain Compassion with which the American citizen regards those who are so unhappy as to be identified with any country other than the Great Republic that is bounded by two oceans and a lot of ice that endures and sand that burns forever.

Shall we say it is the conceit, or the pride, or the fancy notion of the advertising American that his palatial sleeping-cars are among the most beautiful evidences of an advanced civilization, that his sixty-feet-long boxes on wheels, night or day, with a miscellaneous company of from thirty to seventy people, offer the most commodious and entertaining and luxurious method of travelling known, and that the omnibuses and carts and wagons and carriages employed in the United States are, each of its kind, so much better than any that can be constructed in Europe or Asia that it is matter of surprise that the inhabitants of all the countries and the islands of the sea do not appreciate the taste and brilliancy of all his vehicular miracles, and send immediately to get the latest patterns, and listen with delight and awe to the hum of machinery, the buzzing of genius, and the music of the eagle?

The American looks with scorn upon the harness of a cart-horse in London or Paris, and with good grounds in some respects certainly, for there never was any sufficient reason assigned why a horse that has a tremendous burden to draw should be loaded with a gigantic collar weighing half as much as the cart. We may hope for the ultimate emancipation from the tyranny of collars over the French horses, because the cab-drivers in Paris have discarded them and adopted the American-sized collar; but the British harness will probably remain in its original proportions,

unimpaired by the evolutionary influences of the slow centuries. The abatement of the horse-collar in France is a great concession, and some of the conceit of the French people must, in some unaccountable way, have been taken out of them before they consented to it, if, indeed, they know what they have done.

That the American should travel through Europe bearing with him the highest estimation of the many advantages of his own country, is not only commendable in itself, but it is in every way warranted by the existing conditions. That part of the conceit of the traveller, however, which interferes with his enlightenment in those affairs in which the Europeans, through ages of experience upon the same soil, have the advantage of us, is a form which should be deprecated. It is not the true feeling of American patriotism that is conservative of the bliss of ignorance or the joys of indifference.

One thing that should take the conceit out of the American in foreign travel, so far as to bid him to recognize the eternal laws that the nations must obey, or perish, is the absence, throughout those countries of western Europe that are most familiar, of the wastefulness that exhausts the natural resources of this vast and bountiful and beautiful continent. It should be conducive to careful self-examination before indulging overbearing self-sufficiency, to remember that we do not, as a habit, go abroad in our own ships, and that the food we throw away, the fuel we scatter to the winds, the houses and goods that feed our excessive and unexampled fires, the manures we cast away, the grain we do not gather, and the fences that decay, make up an aggregate of loss that would be equal to the maintenance of the standing armies that we deplore as a burden insupportable.

It is one of the unpardonable vanities of the people of this country to hold that our land is so favored that, no matter what is done, we shall still forever have advantages warranting us in perpetual profligacy.

The American continent has not been exhausted by centuries of the impoverishing processes that are in progress, but the time approaches when it will be essential to the salvation of our country that the lessons of thrift that may be learned abroad, if we are not too blind in our pride to behold them, shall be applied at home. We must cherish the riches we have inherited or we shall be a nation of prodigal sons, without a father's house for our final refuge.

It is an American crochet that the forests may be destroyed—indeed, that slaughtering trees is the beginning of the building of greatness and the development of fertility; that the mountains may be denuded of their natural protection; that the trees, and the mosses, and the fallen brush and leaves, and the entangled ferns and shrubbery that spread over them like immense sponges for the retention of moisture—nature's reservoirs of life-giving water—shall be torn way; that the hills may be made barren for the sake of a few sticks of timber, the brooks allowed to dry up; that the grasses need not be cultivated, nor the willows planted to protect the streams;—and so we prepare for floods and droughts alternating. We rejoice in our strength, not remembering that for all these things we shall be brought to judgment. Young men and young countries must alike yield to the divine laws or brave the retribution that is sure.

In this year there have been immense areas of woodlands swept by flames, and the capacity of the new States, where the fires have raged, to support the people of the future, has been impaired. There would not have been as great losses, taking into view the generations that are to come, if cities instead of forests had perished; and yet there is not a grave sense of the public injury and general damage. Concerning these things, we need a quickened popular understanding, and that the conceit of immeasurable resources, beyond all contingencies of irretrievable disaster, should be taken out of us before it is everlastingly too late.

Already we have experienced in Virginia the destruction of the soil by the continuous cultivation of tobacco, so that the lands that a century and a half ago almost literally were fruitful of gold when scratched with the hoe, are now wretchedly poor, productive only of a shabby second growth of timber. The oyster-beds that were the treasures on the coasts, and made the secluded bays that indent our shores reservoirs of wealth beyond computation, have been so cruelly robbed that not far in the future the succulent, excellent, and cheap food, eagerly sought far and near, will have been so far consumed and destroyed that the most rigid economy and careful cultivation can never restore the original opulence that, carefully husbanded, would have been exhaustless as the fisheries of the deep seas.

Shall we not be taught to care for our national inheritance until there are consumed, in our remorseless extravagance, the

virgin riches of the soil, the exuberance of the forests, the food fishes of the streams, the herds that were nourished by the grasses now burned, the flocks of wild fowl that made the marshes musical and darkened the skies? When shall the conceit be taken out of the American people that they are so cared for by a bountiful Providence, whose lavish hand shall pour upon them perennially from horns of plenty, that they can afford to squander in heedless profusion the resources with which the continent was wonderfully endowed?

One of the troubles of the American traveller in Europe, forced upon his attention, is that of obtaining wholesome drinking-water, and he compares his own country with those abroad in that respect, greatly to the disadvantage of the foreigner, and wonders why there are typhoid fever and poisoning from the use of bad water, and he grows weary even of the command of his medical adviser to drink beer and wine; and is forgetful of the Schuylkill that is the affliction of Philadelphia, and the poor water-supplies of the growing cities of New Jersey, and the malarious ice from the Hudson that sickens New York.

What shall move him to cast his eye far along through the years, and try to think of himself as an American citizen some centuries hence, or of the conditions of life that will be upon his children's children? What does he suppose will be the effect upon the water-supply when the woods are wantonly destroyed, and the rivers are dry beds or muddy torrents, and when the leading improvement which a city finds itself called upon to provide itself with is that the drainage, which should restore the wasted soil, shall be flushed into the streams, and at the same time that the water-supply shall be taken from them? Of course, the time must come when there shall be fever and no food in the rivers. The shameful and corroding sin of their pollution cannot go on forever without the appropriate penalty in poverty and pestilence, to warn the human race that lives of thrift, and industry in all good works, and cleanliness, and habits of caring for the general welfare, under competent laws enforced by enlightened public opinion, are requisite to the health, the prosperity, and the happiness of the whole people.

A conceit that should be removed from the American mind, as it might be without the loss of healthy self-consideration, is that these United States constitute the only country where there

has been during the latest generation marked advancement. The truth is that all countries have improved in the era of railways and telegraphs, of steam and steel, the discoveries of the gold of California and the silver of Nevada, the rapidity and comfort of intercourse between nations and continents, the diffusion of intelligence by the press, and the wonders of mechanical achievements that have cheapened and bettered the housing, clothing, feeding, and teaching, and broadened and heightened all the possibilities of the education and comfortableness of mankind.

One who would be above or beyond the conceits that confine or narrow comprehension of surroundings should not limit himself, in regarding the progressive developments of the age, to the American horizon, for there are other countries than ours, though none are fairer, that have grown as rapidly as our own. We are not exclusive in our grand progress. The increase of wealth, material improvement, and popular advantages in Scotland, within forty years, has been almost equal to that of any State of the United States. Even Ireland is emerging from the gloom of her long impoverishment. And it is only to welcome the common light in the universe belonging to all civilization, to recognize, as it shines in our faces, that while we, upon the whole, have the advantages of greater growth from resources more deeply laid and richer and wider than any other country, still we are only advancing at the head of the procession along with the rest of the world, which is made better by a happier appreciation of the beautiful abundance of the earth, if we care for it as rational creatures should, and for the rights of men, and that they may know their duty to defend, preserve, cultivate, and enjoy the fruits of the earth and the fulness thereof. Estimating our national attitude and the dues and hopes of our country by these standards, it becomes us to part with so much of our conceits as may belong to the theory that we alone have an inheritance of enduring riches and abounding righteousness.

We should be contented to be the greatest and happiest of the nations, and find out before it is too late, without other tumults and wars, that there is no people so mighty that they can be unjust with safety, no fault worse than wastefulness of the substance of the earth we inherit, and no crime so perilous as to wrong the poor.

MURAT HALSTEAD.